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Taking Stock

Posted by Ann Hutton on November 5, 2011 in Artists, Screen · 0 Comments



Dennis Stock's James Dean, Times Square, 1955

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"In America we don't have the idea that people are 'masters,' as in a cultural resource with a special status – people who embody something that is important to the culture's history. Dennis Stock was such a master." Hanna Sawka is speaking of the late photographer whose work millions of us have seen without, perhaps, knowing the man himself. His most famous images are the casual shots of James Dean – in New York City, on a farm in Indiana – and many other stage and screen celebrities of the 1950s and '60s. In a career that spanned multiple decades, Stock photographed subjects as varied as intimate portraits of actors, jazz musicians and counterculture iconoclasts, along with images of Nature, travel and symbols of modern culture. His body of work represents a veritable legacy: life in the second half of the 20th century.

Sawka was exposed to his work in film school in Poland. "Magnum photographers were emphasized, and professors there used these great photographs to teach filmmakers. I was familiar with Dennis' photographs, and then my parents had him to dinner when I came home from school. For me it was like meeting a rock star. He must have been flattered. It was very exciting to meet him, and I listened and participated in discussions between him and my father. I felt lucky."

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She was also surprised to learn that no one had fully documented Stock's work and life. When she proposed doing the project, he was enthused. "He knew my work and he respected the school I'd gone to. So eight years ago, I started. We interviewed for almost two years before we started shooting. I worked really closely with him for the last three years of his life – basically, until he fell ill."

The resulting documentary, Beyond Iconic: Photographer Dennis Stock, is now being screened at film festivals such as the Hot Springs Documentary Festival in Hot Springs, Arkansas; the Mostra São Paulo Film Festival in Brazil; the Denver Film Festival; and at the DOC NYC Festival at the IFC Center in Greenwich Village on Wednesday, November 9 at 7 p.m. Co-presented by Magnum Photos, the screening of Beyond Iconic on the photographer's home turf marks the accomplishment realized by Sawka: to bring Stock's legacy into the viewfinder of everyday Americans. Sawka will be joined by author and Stock's wife Susan Richards, Magnum photographer and Stock's longtime friend Thomas Hoepker, and Woodstock photographer and Stock's friend Andrea Barrist Stern, for a panel discussion with question-and-answer session after the screening.

Co-founder of Dances with Films Michael Trent has said, "It's a portrait of a life fully realized." Stock's artistic philosophy, his commitment to integrity of purpose and his ability to see the story in a picture are expertly depicted in this unnnarrated treatment. We see Stock teaching in a workshop at Omega Institute, relaxing at home in Bearsville, moving through the crowds with his camera in hand. A grand display of his photos, both black-and-white and in color, is backed by the perfect original jazz score, composed and performed by locals John Menegon and Teri Roiger.

Stock died in 2010, shortly after completion of this film. "I wish he was around!" says Susan Richards of the attention being brought to her late husband's work by Sawka. "Hanna was very professional, and he was so open with her. She handled him well. He's not an easy guy. As much as I loved him, he was contentious, opinionated. I think he gave her a lot of direction, whether she liked it or not. She was so patient with him, and he was very admiring of her, for tackling this kind of thing. A film is a film, and it's not easy to make it intelligent and accessible and beautiful. And she did. How thrilling for her to be accepted into all these festivals. Beyond Iconic really captures Dennis' philosophy about being an artist, and also about life. It's kind of a life class."

Tickets to the November 9 screening in New York can be purchased at www.docnyc.net.

Tags: Bearsville, Dennis Stock, documentary, Hanna Sawka, James Dean, Magnum, photographer

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